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## Chapter 1

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# Democracy, Real Work, and Falling in Love With the Net

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In my life as an English professor, there are a thousand reasons that computer technology is important now, in 2005. I use computers for word processing, archival research, data collection and analysis, materials preparation, and online communication with my students and colleagues. I teach and develop computer applications, deal with information technology in administrative roles, and write about the impact of computers on education and on the broader society. My longest-running field of scholarly focus is science fiction, the field notes from our technological future. I think these are all satisfying, involving, and self-justifying activities. It would be small wonder if someone chose to work him- or herself into a professional life that allowed him or her to make a living—and a contribution—by pursuing them. But if I squint back into my own past in a certain ray-streaked light, I see this all beginning not with computers, of course, but with my family, with the life of an immigrant community in the heart of the world, and, as trite as it may sound, with a romance with democracy.

I was born in 1946, just after the war, and grew up in New York City. My family lived in Queens until I was nearly seven, and then we moved to Brooklyn. My father, may he rest in peace, died in 1990. His parents, who came from Russia, met each other and bore and raised their children in this country. My father is buried near his parents on Long Island. My mother, whose parents also met on these shores, even now lives in that same Brooklyn apartment she shared with my father, my sister, and me. This heritage of migration, adaptation, and commitment to others as individuals and finally in communities has, for me, much to do with the mechanisms of my work today.

Most of us do not define our work by our relationships with people, but rather by instrumentality or instruments. “I am an orthopedic surgeon” or “I am a stock broker,” someone may say, indicating instrumentality, the material function that person performs. “I play trumpet” or “I teach science fiction,” another may say, indicating the instrument, the matter held in the hand and mind as the work proceeds. Viewed from a certain angle, this depersonalization of work is sad, and may even be destructive. Saying “I teach science fiction” suggests something quite different from saying “I teach college students.” Saying “I write books” is not at all the same as saying “I write to educate people” or “I write to amuse people.” Why do we let people fall out of our consciousness? Perhaps because they are ubiquitous, like air. Who would define him- or herself as “a breather”? For most of us, it usually goes without saying, the world is foremost the habitation we share with the rest of humanity, so that, paradoxically, we can and do take the human world for granted. Instead of focusing on people, we focus on the functions and tools by which we work in that world, the instrumentalities and instruments. These, being more conspicuous to us, become objects of terror (The Bomb, anthrax, pollution) or delight.

Everyone, I think, knows what it means to love a tool. A car is a tool for transporting people and things, as well as a tool for seduction and for enacting freedom. “America’s love affair with the automobile” becomes no less true for repetition. But the thrill of acquiring that shiny package of potential merely magnifies the late-August glory we felt as school children acquiring new three-ring binders, a bright plastic pencil sharpener, a perfectly pristine pink eraser. In college I bought books at the beginning of each semester, lined them up on a cleared-out shelf, and stood back, contemplating their colorful spines, smelling their new-bookness, and anticipating reading that would last hours and hours and hours. Computers are such tools. They evaporate distance, enable romance, and put freedom into the hands of anyone who can reach the public keyboard in a library. They store our symbols—words and numbers, yes, but also sounds and images—and enable us to create those symbols, and to erase them. When we acquire a new computer, we contemplate its thingness, touch its surfaces, and anticipate our immersion into the endless worlds it opens. I do not wonder that so many people have come to computers. I certainly do not wonder that I have. But when I first came to computers, they were already things in the service of people. The first time I used computers in teaching, it was to fulfill a request from a student that we extend the boundaries of our lecture course through a voluntary online discussion. That was in 1975, a long time ago. But the mechanism of digital communication captured me well before I became a professor.

For a long while, starting in the fourth grade and lasting until he went away to college, my best friend was Jerry Eilenberg, a fellow two years ahead of me in school and equally in love with things. When we were children, Jerry lived in my apartment building. I was in 6E, he was in 4F. That meant that he lived two floors down and one apartment over. Those were the days when every home had a tele-

phone—one heavy, black telephone—and you did not use it casually. So Jerry and I went to the hardware store with our saved-up allowances, and bought ourselves little lights and toggle switches and screws and “bread boards” to attach them to, and batteries and wire, lots of wire, enough wire to run out my bedroom window, down the fire escape past our unsuspecting fifth- and fourth-floor neighbors, and over into Jerry’s bedroom window. We didn’t know Morse code so we invented our own. We used light flashes to call each other’s silent attention, so as not to alert our parents. We checked on each other’s presence, on whether we wanted to get together, on where to meet. We didn’t know to call this “instant messaging.” We did know that it connected us and made our world better. On a sunny day, we could agree to meet in the playground, perhaps to play handball. On a rainy day, we could agree to meet on the landing by the roof exit, perhaps to play chess. On any day, we could agree to visit each other and work on making model cars by cutting cardboard parts with Exacto knives, gluing the parts, painting the result, sharing the experience of construction. Any day or night we could connect. That little light could flash at any time. It was very good to know.

We did not build that telegraph because some teacher told us to; we built it because we wanted to. That telegraph was no empty exercise; it functioned in our world. I did not know it then, but the pleasure of that telegraph comprised pleasures that would become, years later, part of my daily professional life.

In the old model professoriate, a literary scholar, alone and armed with but a bright idea and a willingness to explore, strides into an imposing library, wanders the stacks, reads heedless of sunrises and sunsets in a tiny carrel, and emerges, years later, a few hairs grayer, blinking in the unaccustomed sunshine, to discover the nearest post office, manuscript clutched tightly under an armpit, hoping for publication. It was a solitary life, but valuable. It produced great books and sustained—embodied—worthy lives. But it was essentially private labor. There is another way.

Our telegraph was not created alone, like the manuscript, but as an act of collaboration. We created our code not in the hope that it would matter to someone, but in the knowledge that it mattered to both of us, writers and readers. We used that telegraph not because we had to, but because it was part of our world. We used it when our parents allowed it and when they did not. The lessons here are simple: *Collaboration energizes engagement, technology empowers collaboration, horizontal networks undercut vertical authority, and real work is better than homework.*

Computers do all that and more, every day, willy-nilly, regardless of whether we think about them. They enable collaboration that energizes engagement, they empower their users, they make connections and organize communities and labor that no controlling authority may have intended or foreseen, and they allow the performance of real work. Put another way, inexpensive networked computer technology fosters democracy. Given my heritage, of course, I love it.

True, any technology, like the cliché sword, is two-edged. In the hands of the resourceful Viet Cong, even the benignant bicycle became a key logistic weapon of war. But the tendency of the bicycle is to offer healthy exercise, exhilarating transportation, and individual empowerment, all with comparatively little cost to the environment. The computer can be used for data-mining that allows the invasion of privacy and for data-management that allows central command and control. Yet the computer can only perform those functions if enabled and supported by a social structure tolerant of those activities, a social structure that can thrive in computer networks only if access to them is artificially limited, the flows of information restricted, and the rights of individuals set by mechanisms that are not intrinsic to the computer. On its own, like the bicycle and our youthful telegraph, the tendency of electronic networking is to stimulate us, carry us, and empower us, all with comparatively little cost to the environment. The more end users and the more open the network, the greater the tendency to flatten the social structure, to share knowledge, experience, authority, and work. On their days off, urban people with bicycles can escape the city for the refreshment of the country, and rural people with bicycles can escape the country for the sophistication of the city. In any spare moments off, anyone with a computer and a network connection can escape time and place to find the refreshment and sophistication offered virtually anywhere the human mind has roamed.

All of which I came to understand explicitly only years later. But I believe, with our telegraph, I felt the gathering force of that understanding even in the fourth grade.

Jerry and I both went to “science” high schools, special academies maintained by the New York City Public Schools for those who could pass the entrance exams. Jerry went to Brooklyn Tech; I went to Stuyvesant. To me, the idea of traveling to Manhattan each day on the subway was liberating.

The apparently odd fact is not that I, a professor of English, went to a science high school, but that I, who went to a science high school and actually took some graduate courses in physics while still an undergraduate, ever became a professor of English. I was much more involved with things than with symbols as a young child, but perhaps that is true of all children. We all play with our toes and bat at our covers before we utter a word. Still, we do call out even in the first moments of our lives, uttering sounds that forerun symbols, cries that forerun communication. I’m not sure what comes first for human beings, things or symbols, but I do know when I began my pursuit of science.

I remember my first “experiment” vividly. I was four. This experiment happened in the kitchen of my father’s parents’ apartment in Brooklyn. I had found an old, ripped-out electrical cord from a clothes iron. Not only can I still picture sitting cross-legged on Grandma’s yellow linoleum floor, cord across my lap, but I can feel the heavy cord in my hands, wrapped in a lanyard pattern of mostly black material with some white threading through it; I hear one thump as the rubbery,

black industrial plug hits the floor; I can almost taste the copper at the frayed other end, with its shredded cloth insulation and tangle of protruding wires; the whole grown-up albeit tattered apparatus rests in my hands and across my lap. Someone—probably my father—had given me what you might call the hydraulic model of electricity: a current flows out of one of the two slots in a wall outlet, down one of the two wires in a cord, runs through some device like a lamp or a radio, makes the device work, and then flows back through the other wire and into the other slot. What would happen, I wondered, if there were no device between the arriving and leaving wires, if there were nothing to retard the flow? My infantile knowledge of physics did not yet comprehend the power unleashed by removing resistance. But I did know that electricity was dangerous. It was as if I held a dormant snake. I decided to find out for myself.

Fortunately, the marginal triumph of self-preservation over reckless curiosity led me to a survivable protocol. Being careful to keep the cord unplugged, I skinned back the insulation from the torn end of the cord and separated the newly visible wires into the two twined strands they must have been throughout. I retwisted them into two strands and looped them carefully away from each other. I pulled the end shreds of insulation between the strands and tied it. I then twisted the very ends of the strands together. I had a heavy-duty electrical cord with a circle of copper at one end. Still sitting on the floor, I held it out before me with my left hand and leaned over toward the wall, holding the plug in my right. I plugged it in.

The flash of light was instantaneous. All in a second I dropped the cord, it hit the floor and vaporized the linoleum, and smoke obscured my vision. I realized that there had been some clap of noise. And then I could see again—and hear my grandmother scream from the next room—although I could not see as well as before since the kitchen lights now were out. Fortunately, it was afternoon. The scorched wooden floor showed through a black-edged hole in the linoleum twice as wide as my hand. And I was all right. And I had learned that *you need resistance*. Power has to do something or it becomes destructive.

Then I thought that was a fact. Later I thought it was a metaphor. Now I know it is both.

Stuyvesant was a vibrant place, drawing students from all over New York City. In those ancient days, unlike the Bronx High School of Science, Stuyvesant admitted only boys. Although not gender-blind, the process of admission to our special academy was class- and color-blind, so we had fellows of all backgrounds. Many of these bright, eager, often driven boys were the sons and grandsons of immigrants who had come from everywhere across the seas and land to try for something better. In that place, each had his own chance. The romance of that, the friendship of that, the community of that, inspired me then and inspires me still.

Most of the hour trip each way between my apartment and Stuyvesant was spent on the subway, which even then I understood was part of a transportation network that bound together a thriving social organism of 8 million souls, a vibrant, func-

tional community that both allowed and enriched enormous neighborhood, family, and individual diversity. At one point, the train became elevated for a few stops to go over the Gowanus Canal. On that stretch, one could see industrial and tenement Brooklyn in all its motley essence. Looking between the tenements, off to the west, one could just catch a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. I must admit to sentimentalism here because to obscure sentiment would obscure the truth. I took the subway twice a day every school day for the three years I spent at Stuyvesant and not once on any single trip did I ever fail to strain, through the human press of rush hour crowds if need be, to catch that glimpse of the welcoming lady. Not once did that glimpse fail to make me feel gratitude and pride.

When I visit my mother, we still use that train, say to go to a Manhattan museum. I still make sure to see. I still feel gratitude and pride.

It was something in those days, not just for me, but for so many people like me, to think of what New York represented. To hear the different languages. To see people of every description interacting successfully, making the city and all its component activities work. To know that the world had agreed to put its own hopeful new home, the United Nations, on the shore of our East River.

Now, of course, I can see that the subway system, the school system, the canal system, and even the web of international agreements were all in some sense exemplars of a general theory of systems, the sort of thing I later learned could be theorized by von Neumann and Shannon and others and put into everyone's hands via their desktop computers. Then I just felt it.

In the 1960s, computers weren't what they are today. Ordinary citizens could see that big companies had started to automate accounting. We received monthly bills that included the instruction "Do not bend, fold, spindle, or mutilate" because those bills had to be physically fed into a temperamental card reader. Now those card readers are museum pieces, and the computers they served are as invisible to everyone as they were then to the public. We knew the word *computer*, but we certainly couldn't touch one. Even if you could see one, it was doubtless in a special, air conditioned room behind half-glass walls.

Doug Wise, a Stuyvesant classmate who became my first-year roommate at Cornell, actually worked with computers. Outside of school, he got a part-time job with IBM, where he learned Fortran and did some programming. Fortran and programming were new words to the rest of us. But Doug made good money for a kid, and the concepts he reported were interesting.

In 1965, after my fifth semester, I left Cornell. At that time, I was a physics major on my way to becoming a physician, but for many reasons, I was intermittently miserable. I decided I needed to rethink why I was in school and where I was going. Wanting a change of weather from an Ithaca winter and wanting to go as far as my meager money would allow in search of someplace new, I took the Greyhound bus to New Orleans. Money-less Yankees weren't welcome. There was no lady in that harbor.

When I finally got a steady, paying job, I worked for Western Geophysical Company, then (perhaps still) the world's largest independent oil exploration enterprise. Western Geophysical would send trucks and ships around the world. The trucks would rise up on thick stilts, the way industrial cherry pickers do, and drive a pile repeatedly, regularly down at the ground, thumping away. The ships would trail miles-long cables strung at regular intervals with buoys that exploded in perfect timing. Both trucks and ships held seismographs that recorded the sound waves that bounced back from under the land and sea. Those seismographs, long rolls of vertically-lined white paper with squiggly horizontal tracings, were sent back to New Orleans. Someone had to read these seismographs to see the abrupt changes in the tracings that marked a change in the speed of sound, which marked in turn a change in the underlying geology. Someone had to count out the vertical lines between those changes and calculate the distance the sound had traveled. Someone had to turn those distances into underland and undersea three-dimensional maps. Someone had to carry those seismographs and maps to the bus station for shipping to Western Geophysical's oil company clients, where geologists used them to decide where to drill. I was one of the someones, counting, mapping, and carrying.

My job title? "Computer."

Today, I use computers. Then, I was one.

Overall, I call this progress.

When I returned to college, it was to pursue the humanities. Computing as I had been doing it allowed a youthful spirit to race against himself (how many seismographs can I read in an hour?), but the work was essentially dull and solitary. The real action, from my viewpoint, was the work of those unseen and unmet geologists, but the life of rocks and salt domes did not attract me. To me, it was books that allowed connection. Language was how one connected. I wanted to compute less and read more; to calculate less and write more. I became an English major.

I began teaching at the University of Michigan in 1970. In 1972, I established "The Freshman English Republic." This was an introductory composition course of ten sections. All the sections attended a joint, weekly lecture from me on some matter rhetorical or otherwise, and each section had three additional meetings each week with their section leaders. The aim—"Real work is better than homework"—was to develop a sense of community and to write and edit for that community. Each section had a self-selected editorial committee that worked with the pieces its students produced to generate the most worthwhile submissions to a course-wide editorial committee, chosen by the students, to use in creating our course-wide semi-weekly newspaper. It worked marvelously. The knowledge that other students cared about their work, that classmates might really read their work, that people they didn't even know might really read their work drove the student writers. There were no computers at all. People still typed their essays and photocopied their submissions to the various layers of editors. The resulting newspaper

was photocopied for course-wide distribution. The process was slow, but it worked, with information flowing mostly within sections, but also across sections in an intermittently common space. We didn't know it then, but "The Freshman English Republic" existed in a Course Wide Web.

Naturally, the course died. The administrative burden of fostering that much interchange and collaboration killed it. I taught it for three years, but no one was willing to pick it up despite the overwhelmingly positive student response.

Now, with the World Wide Web, perhaps I or someone should try it again. Or perhaps it is now unnecessary.

I learned a lot from "The Freshman English Republic." One of the things I learned came from giving those weekly lectures. I discussed rhetorical sequences, the course readings, the organization of essays, research techniques, and more. Because we were all sharing our work anyway, I decided, whenever appropriate, to photocopy real work by the students and use that, on an overhead projector, to instruct the class. The initial idea was to let 250 students look over my shoulder, just as a student would in a one-on-one office visit, to see how I might edit the work. As I proceeded, people could raise questions from the floor. What I did next with the text depended on those questions. The clear reactions I received and the commentaries on the student evaluations confirmed that this concrete, visible, interactive instruction was the most engaging aspect of the lectures by far.

It does not take much to recognize here the potential for self-testing, simulation, and message boards once those tools exist.

Potential, however, is not always realized. In 1975, Mike Brown, an engineering student in my large science fiction class, a lecture course that had no sections in those days, asked whether we could use *Confer* with the course. "What is *Confer*?" I asked. It turned out to be a quite flexible, albeit by today's standards incredibly primitive, computer-networked bulletin board system. The University had it up and running and available to anyone who could get to a terminal. Because terminals gave access to statistics packages and other main-framed tools that students needed, there were terminals in many places on campus, including a few in the building with my office. I said that I wasn't willing to run the bulletin board or make its use mandatory, but if lots of people wanted the chance to have discussion and if Mike would run it, I would commit myself to going to the terminal five days a week and participating. I did despite the fact that only about fifteen of the 250 students then in the course ever used it more than twice. The experience was like a science experiment with a negative result. Like it or not, one learns something. From the 235, I learned that a good idea may fail without a palpable payoff for its execution. From the fifteen, I learned that information technology had enormous teaching potential.

There is another lesson here, too, one that I may be unqualified to preach, but certainly need to embrace: *We need humility*. Had I not been willing to let Mike, a student, take the lead, I would not have come to online bulletin boards until, well,

who knows? But humility can be a difficult lesson; it runs against our professionalization.

In the 1980s, before the ubiquity of personal, networked computers in American universities, my colleague Macklin Smith and I devised and taught a course called "Practical English." This was a composition course based on the notion that we could teach students to work with each other, to be good editors, and thus to edit themselves. To elevate this peer editing from homework to real work, we gave the students the power of the grade. True, we acted as a court of appeal, but appeals quickly became unnecessary. By relying on a class full of editors instead of just one or two, we found that a single instructor could successfully manage a class of 40 students. The student evaluations were high; our faculty colleagues judged the student writing excellent, and again the course died. We couldn't get any of our graduate students—the most usual instructors for composition courses—to adopt this method. Why not? Because they were, quite rightly, making themselves into humanities professionals.

We discovered that few composition teachers will willingly rely so strongly on the power of the technology of peer editing (whether computer mediated or not) that they will allow peer grading. Yet grading is the true empowerment; it is what makes the homework of editing a classmate's essay into the real work of consequential judgment. Putting the power of grading into the students' hands shows the depth of our commitment to that technology or, if one prefers, that technique. Yet most teachers will not do it because, in an institution that protects the sanctity of its credentialing process, the grade makes the final difference and the teacher feels that he or she has a professional obligation to ensure directly that the grade is "right." Ultimately, the teacher feels that every bit of work that contributes to the student's grade must be graded by the teacher. But must it? Don't we have faith in our students' ability to form reliable judgments? We say we do; indeed, if we did not, we could not promise them that they can learn to judge their own drafts in deciding when to stop revising and hand them in. But to acknowledge that the students' grades may be as good as ours takes humility. This is no easy stance for a paid professional. Many of us won't even try it at home.

In adopting computer technology for academic use, faculty often find themselves having to acknowledge the limitations of their technical knowledge, just as in a large, peer-graded composition section we have to acknowledge the limitations of our analytic time. We can't know everything just as we can't read everything. But while in a composition course a teacher can assuage professional guilt by claiming to read the last and only truly important—because graded—draft, in a course that employs technology that some students may know better than the instructor, guilt cannot be assuaged. Rather, it has to be released. We have to be willing not only to learn from our students, but to believe truly that learning from them is more, not less, responsible to our roles as teachers. Letting them see us learn, let-

ting them teach us, forms them and us into a more vigorous community. *Computer technology democratizes education.*

I have been using information technology in my courses ever since Mike Brown proposed that I do. I am sorry Mike's hopes for a robust exchange failed. (I now know that this result is predictable: Without making participation mandatory, in large enrollment courses, mere chat always fails. Self-help tests, however, the kind that prepare one for exams, succeed. "Real work is better than homework.") However, I thank Mike sincerely. My reliance on Mike to run our bulletin board taught me that I could play with new tools in my professional life without having to master them. So I continue to explore new options because I love the tools—even though I love more what the tools can do in the world of people—just as much now as I did when I was a child.

Children need a sense of capability (the famous buzz word is *empowerment*) not only with tasks per se, but with tasks that have social importance. That need does not go away. My current groups of collaborating students who put original sites on the Web want to know that their work, unlike old copies of *The Freshman English Gazette*, will be available indefinitely and to all comers. They ask me whether I'll make sure the work stays up after they graduate. When did an undergraduate ever ask that a teacher keep indefinitely a copy of a course essay? One of the great consequences of networked technology is that it makes possible a shift from homework to real work, and it does so for everyone. This is at the heart of democracy.

There are lessons we learn in life that we acknowledge every day. In this chapter, I have offered some that I continue to value. Of those, the seven most important are these:

1. Collaboration energizes engagement.
2. Computer technology empowers collaboration.
3. Horizontal networks undercut vertical authority.
4. Inexpensive and networked computer technology fosters democracy.
5. We need resistance.
6. We need humility.
7. Real work is better than homework.

Why do these lessons matter so much to me? Please allow me one more recollection.

On a trip back to New York in the 1990s, I visited Ellis Island, the most famous and important East Coast gateway for American immigration before the advent of jet aircraft. I went through the restored site with my mother, reading together about the tremulous refugees who prayed they would present no medical conditions that would lead to immediate deportation, who prayed they would be allowed entrance, who prayed for a new life. It was stunning to realize that on this island, with the view of Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, the desperate hopes of so many of these

people, after hardship, deprivation, and impoverishment, could all be shattered. Knowledge—you bear the signs of sickness—is power, and power is not always kind. But more knowledge—we can cure you—is so often the solution to the violence unleashed by too little. Even then there was a quarantine hospital on the island, and some left it for New York. I came to Ellis Island, with my mother, seeking knowledge about myself.

Outside the main building there is a long series of free-standing aluminum panels on which are inscribed the names of hundreds of thousands of those immigrants. I had been told that the names of my great-grandfather, Ephraim Gorelick, the father of my mother's mother, and his wife, Bassia, were engraved there. The immigrants' names, I must report, were inscribed as contributions came in to support the refurbishing of the site. They are not in alphabetical order. I could have spent days looking for my great-grandparents. It was a chilly day, especially on a windy island in the harbor. So before I left that refuge, I turned to the computer in the building, I entered Ephraim Gorelick, and I found which wall had his name.

Like most Jews, I am named in honor of a revered relative who was deceased before the day of my birth. My English name is Eric, but my Hebrew name is Ephraim. I walked out behind that building and into the bright, cold sunlight. I walked among the aluminum panels and found the one I needed. I scanned the inscriptions and found this: "The Ephraim and Bessie Gorelick Family." I took off my glove and lightly touched the writing. My fingers rested on their names as I looked to the right at the Statue of Liberty and then to the left at Manhattan and Brooklyn. Had they not come, I would not be there now. Had they been turned away, I would not even exist. Had he not been the one, I would not even be me. I carry his name. It was for me an overwhelming moment.

The computer had only a small part in that moment, but it was an essential part, another act of opening oneself to the world, of fostering capability, connectedness, and democracy. As I sit here in Ann Arbor, Michigan, writing these recollections, I pause and go to the Web. In only a moment, I relearn that those aluminum panels are called collectively *The American Immigrant Wall of Honor*, and my name is on panel 170. Thanks to the computer, I know it again, here, now, this very instant in which I feel the real need to write about a life in which, in some sense, I am what I do and do what I am, an individual who is part of a community of scholars, a citizen of a city and nation, a link in a chain of generations, a person, I hope, doing real work in the world. A citizen of a democracy.

Professionally and personally, that is why I use computers.

# Technology and English Studies

Innovative Professional Paths

*Edited by*

James A. Inman and Beth L. Hewett



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